Achieving High Standards

To increase test scores or to be world-class in math and science without empowering students or affirming the dignity of human life is to lose the essence of what we and education are presumably all about … In the end, our goal must be not only to prepare students for careers, but also to enable them to live with dignity and purpose; not only to give knowledge to the student, but also to channel knowledge to humane ends …Boyer in Goldberg, 1995

Effective early childhood classrooms provide rich experiences that offer quality content and are appropriate for the learning capabilities of the children. **It is only through the application of appropriate early childhood learning practices that high standards can be implemented and achieved.**

A perception by some that the implementation of content standards is in conflict with established perspectives on early education reflects misunderstanding both of the intent of standards and how to provide effective early childhood programs. Misunderstanding of good early childhood practices by educators can result in teaching practices which do not sufficiently challenge children to reach their highest potential (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 1991.) Kindergarten/primary classrooms that are "experientially rich", but "content poor" are unacceptable. Likewise, standards must never be applied in ways that cause any young child to experience repeated failure. Failure is the antithesis of achieving high standards.

Appropriate practice is about **how** children learn, **how** highly competent teachers teach, and **how** family members and school personnel work cooperatively to support each child's learning and development. **Standards are the target. One does not abandon good practice to lead children toward the achievement of high standards.** To do so results in the opposite outcome. Responsible practitioners ensure that expectations remain high, but that teaching practices adapt to the range of capacities of young learners, so that repeated success leads toward higher and higher achievement.

Practices, which have been demonstrated to assist young children in meeting high standards, include:

- Providing high-quality and age-appropriate curriculum and instruction which emphasizes direct interaction with materials, with adults, and with other children.
- Emphasizing early childhood literacy, including outreach by the school to children's families and the community's prekindergarten programs (Snow, et al., 1998).
- Involving children in setting meaningful and accessible learning goals, selecting and managing their learning, and in assessing their learning.
- Employing a wide variety of instructional approaches to assure that the learning levels and individual styles of children are accommodated.
- Reducing class sizes at the primary level to below twenty (Nye, et al., 1994).
- Keeping children and teachers together in heterogeneous groups for more than one year (Katz, et al., 1990).

- Providing professional development that deepens teachers' content knowledge and improves instructional strategies to engage all children in learning.
- Setting explicit expectations for all stakeholders, including families and communities.
- Extending learning time through before- and after-school programs, tutoring, summer programs, and year-round schooling.

Currently accepted practices for working with younger children are based on a newer synthesis of viewpoints about growth and learning and take into consideration what is generally understood about:

- How development and learning unfold in universal or normative patterns
- How the patterns may differ for each individual
- The influence of the family and of the community context, including the language and culture the child brings to school, as well as the expectations of the larger culture for what needs to be learned (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Some educators and members of the public think that setting standards and then only accepting children in school when they are "ready" to achieve them is the way to elevate achievement. In reality, young children are always ready to learn. They have been learning from the moment of birth, are eager to learn more and more, and can achieve quite spectacular things when caring adults (family members, caregivers, and teachers) interact in ways that help them move to that "just manageable" next level of accomplishment.

This concern with whether state and/or local standards are achievable is causing some educators to discuss a return to practices which have been shown to be ineffective in the past. Those include: recommending a change in the kindergarten entrance age to cause children to be older at the beginning of school; screening prior to kindergarten entrance to limit the enrollment of the "unready"; extra-year programs (programs known as readiness or developmental kindergartens and junior, pre-first, or pre-second grade;) and/or recommending grade retention at the kindergarten/primary level. Such practices have been demonstrated through decades of research to be ineffective and continue to have unintended negative consequences for children (Meisels, 1992). Reinstating them will do nothing to improve children's achievement.

The establishment of standards is intended to increase children's opportunities to learn—not to punish them for failing to meet the standard at an arbitrarily determined point in their development. **Educators and parents must work cooperatively to assure that every child receives the support and instruction needed to reach his or her highest potential.**

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